

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Warren Brunner
Interviewer is Mary Reed
May 30th, 2018

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. . . This symbol refers to an interruption to the speaker

Reed:

Alright, I'm going to start out with an opening statement and we'll take it from there. Good afternoon. My name is Mary Reed. I'm interviewing Warren Brunner at Churchill Weavers in Berea, Kentucky. Today is Wednesday, May 30th, 2018. This interview is part of the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association's mission to interview Kentucky's craft luminaries and organizations in order to save their stories. I will add that this is the old Churchill Weavers building and Warren Brunner has a studio in the space at this time.

Camera man:

Oh, and could you do one thing and move that bottle of water to your right stand by your left hand. Next to your left (inaudible).

Brunner:

What was that?

Reed:

It's some boxes that fell over. Okay. All right. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. Warren, can you tell us something about yourself and where you're from and how you got to Berea?

Brunner:

Oh, I was raised in a little fishing village up on Lake Superior called Bayfield, Wisconsin, and then it washed away in the flood and I moved to Old Claire and I was in high school there. And that's where I became a photographer the last year in high school, I worked on two daily newspapers and I had a little pass in my hand. And when there was an accident or an event, the newspaper would call me and the principal would come and get me, I'd take it off and take pictures. And that was fun. I did that for two years.

Reed:

About what year was this?

Brunner:

'46.

Reed:

'46. Wow.

Camera man:

Can I go see what this guy's doing?

Reed:

Okay. All right. So from high school in Wisconsin, I'll let you pick the story up.

Brunner:

And then I went in the Navy a couple of years when I got out, I went to a photography school and went on a lake Indiana, and I put a sign on the bulletin board, have camera, will travel. Some people remember the old Western that (). And he'd always just pull out that little card and so a lady named Mrs. Masterson hired me to come to Berea and manage her studio. And then I bought it from her and then a little college girl came in to buy a roll of film. And one thing led to another and we got three daughters and they're all artists. They all went to Berea.

Reed:

You met your wife here at Berea College?

Brunner:

Yeah, she came in to buy a roll of film. One thing led to another and we're still here.

Reed:

You're still here. And you said how many children later?

Brunner:

Three children, four grandchildren, and two great grandchildren.

Reed:

Wow. Wonderful. So, you're noted for taking photographs of Appalachia and the faces of Appalachia. Can you explain how you got into that?

Brunner:

Well, Loyal Jones started it all. About 1964, he called me into his office wanted to know if I wanted to take some pictures. And it was in Clay County, in Mill Creek. And I had two children then and an old Jeep and I packed them all up and we went up there and we camped for three days while this Appalachian volunteer was working with the students, the children in that valley teaching them to read and write, and she showed movies and she did all kinds of things. And we just camped out in the field and our kids, played with their kids. In the evening, our kids would read to them because they were just learning to read. And we also sat around and snipped beans. And so the interesting thing we photographed every child in that valley. And then that was in 1964, in 1984, Dr. Boyd sociologists at Berea college, we went back and re-photographed each one of those children. And that was a real unique experience. He interviewed him and he checked the school records and the children in that valley progressed farther in the public school system than any of the other kids in Clay County. So that volunteer that worked all summer educating those kids really paid off.

Reed:

Wow. Very interesting. So Loyal Jones is with, what Appalachian studies at...

Brunner:

Appalachian Center, they call it now. It's actually named after him, but he's retired.

Reed:

And you had a photography studio set up at that time? And he just reached out?

Brunner:

Yeah. So, and then after I wandered around in the mountains and found all these pretty places, then I'd go back on weekends and photograph waterfalls and swinging bridges and stuff like that. And that's where the pictures that I sold that at the Kentucky Guild fair, I had sort of had three hats. Maybe I was a studio photographer, a fine art photographer and then sort of a documentary. But now that I'm retired, I'm a street photographer and wherever I go, I just take my little camera. And I just, I just take snapshots like that. And so that how it all happened.

Reed:

(laughs) So you always have a camera in your hand.

Brunner:

And then for a while, you know, they write books about street photographers. They were in New York, but I carried my camera wherever I went. And then like when I go out for coffee in the morning, I'd photograph the men at the table and then a week later, so I'd bring them, bring them back to their picture. So, they said here comes that crazy man with the camera and they sort of let me take their picture. They sort of expect it.

Reed:

Yeah. So I guess you've seen great changes in photography through the years.

Brunner:

Yeah. I think when I moved to Berea in '54, there were probably only three cameras in town. I had one, the college had one and then there was another man in town that had one, you know, and then now we're in the digital age and everybody in Berea has got a camera.

Reed:

And you have cell phones.

Brunner:

Yeah.

Reed:

Did you develop your own film?

Brunner:

Yeah.

Reed:

Had a dark room?

Brunner:

Yeah. One day a man, just a few years ago before I retired a man from Eastern came and he wanted me to spend the afternoon with him. He'd never been in a dark room and he wanted to

see what it was like. The dark rooms are gone now. So we don't use it anymore. So that was sort of interesting, you know, how that sort of passed away.

Reed:

So, do you miss that or?

Brunner:

Yeah. Yeah. All the fingers on your left hand turned brown, like a chain smoker. And that was from the chemicals, you know, that you had to use. I always used... this was my wet hand and this was my dry hand. And so that's all gone. I miss the smell. (laughs)

Reed:

(laughs) Of the chemicals?

Brunner:

Yeah.

Reed:

Yeah. Okay. So tell me about your history with the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen.

Brunner:

Well, I'm sort of indebted to them, because I didn't know I was an artist until I went out there at the fair and that was kind of fun. And it was interesting meeting people and see what they thought of your photographs. One lady came by and said, are these oil paintings, you know, and I felt kind of honored. Then another lady came by, she said, these are just snapshots that you enlarged aren't they? You had two kinds of people out there. And that was fun. And it was a family affair. So I took my wife and kids and we just sat out there all day visiting with people selling pictures. And that was fun.

Reed:

So were you the official photographer for the Guild at one time?

Brunner:

I don't think they had one, but I did a lot of pictures for them.

Reed:

The unofficial photographer.

Brunner:

Yeah. Yeah. I had my camera out there and then I'd take pictures and send them to them. I don't know if they ever paid me or hired me, but it all just, we all did it.

Reed:

Are there other organizations that you've worked for as a photographer and did projects for?

Brunner:

During the war on poverty, I worked for 30 different agencies and I went all over the state from Hopkinsville to up in the mountains, West Virginia. I worked () for Save the Children. Then there was Phoenix Kayaks. They made kayaks up in the mountains and I went to Barbourville and there were factories down there that were started to teach people woodworking and stuff like that. And I photographed that and I photographed the chair company and then they had a lot of agricultural products or they raised pigs and rabbits and I photographed the people doing all those things,

Reed:

The war on poverty, or you saying the sixties? Or the federal war on poverty?

Brunner:

Yeah. And we went up in the mountains and sometimes we stayed with the families overnight and they took us around to different places that we'd never would have seen, you know, that ordinary person would drive by and not go up that little road, you know? And so we went to a lot of sort of hidden places.

Reed:

So you were documenting the living conditions for the world to see?

Brunner:

Yeah, I did that. I got a sign up there. It says the beauty of Appalachia. And then the one underneath, it says the needs of Appalachia. So there were two things going on at the same time after the war was over, then I went back in and took the beautiful pictures of Appalachia. Kentuckians for the Commonwealth was a nice organization to work with because they had tours and they had a fly over, you know, where you flew over an airplane and you got to photograph the strip mines and stuff like that. So there's a lot of people in and around Berea that open doors.

Reed:

Okay. What about the Hindman Settlement School?

Brunner:

I had a ball there.

Reed:

Tell us about it.

Brunner:

Well, Mike Mullins, I had to work for him for nothing, but I got room and board and free film. So he was a real wheeler dealer. And then there was James Still. He autographed a book to me. He said: To Brunner who helped Appalachia see and know itself. And then, I was cleaning up here and I found a letter from him and he said, we are both in the same game, me with words and you with photographs. So I thought that was kind of nice. I enjoyed that.

Reed:

That is very nice. Now he's buried there on campus isn't he?

Brunner:

Probably is. Yeah.

Reed:

I think so. Of course Mike Mullins has gone now too.

Brunner:

Yeah. And his wife was a dear friend of ours. We know her when she's in Berea College.

Reed:

Oh my goodness.

Brunner:

And I photographed her father and mother and in different people in her family.

Reed:

They're doing a lot of renovations there now. It's going to look different here soon, I think.

Brunner:

And I enjoyed staying at Pine Mountain. That was fun.

Reed:

Yes. And did you document that school there or the people around it or?

Brunner:

Yeah. Yeah. And a lot of it was done through Save the Children. I worked a lot for them photographing children that they were going to sponsor.

Reed:

Okay. Were these photographs used as fundraisers?

Brunner:

Yeah.

Reed:

Where they put on calendars or books or?

Brunner:

No, I think they were just sent to the individual. They were real careful that they wouldn't appear to be exploiting the people that was the big problem in Appalachian. A lot of photographers exploited people.

Reed:

And you were sensitive to that?

Brunner:

Yeah. In the book I did on mountain churches, it took five years, took 4,000 pictures and then came out with a book with a few hundred pictures in it. And this lady was working on her doctorate and she saw church picture in my window and she said, if you got any more church pictures. And I said, no, but we'll go take some. And we traveled together five years and she got her doctorate from Columbia and won the Bancroft award for her work. And it was fun. So everybody, I think, needs a collaborator, a person to work with. So I never did go out alone. I always had somebody with me or somebody took me, I would Save the Children, you know, they, the families knew I was coming and what to expect. And that was kind of a nice working that way. And in the back of her book, she wrote a three or four page story about photography. And she sort of complimented me for being unobtrusive. And as we went to maybe over a hundred churches, everybody welcomed us and we ate with those people. We spent a night in their homes and we went everywhere with them. And one man, I asked him if I could take a few pictures during the service. And I took two rolls of film and I went up and I said, thank you for letting me take some pictures. And he said, oh, have you taken them already? So hundreds of experiences like that, we were driving down the road one day, the University of Tennessee published the book. And you only had to have a model release for the people if you use their name and you didn't have to have releases for anything else. And so we had to go back and we had five or six people we had to find. And we, Pat and I spent three days driving around Pennington Gap and stuff like that and finding these people. And so we drove down this road, it was a dead end road. And we looked up and there was a little boy up in the tree and then some more boys came and he says, he says, that's my brother up there. And if our mother catches us, he's in big trouble. And I had a van, a big van and so we parked underneath that limb. And he dropped down, landed on the roof and jumped down into my arms. And I said, we're trying to find this man so we can get a model release. And he says, oh, that's my papaw, he lives right down there. So, wonderful things happened like that. And then we went back to another lady and each time we went, we gave you the pictures of the family and this lady, he was in a housing project and she had just moved in and we went to this man's house for dinner. And they said, we're looking for this lady right here. Could you help us find her? And the lady we were eating dinner with was the head of the housing projects. She says, oh yeah, she lives in number one. So we drove down there and I walked up there with that picture and she grabbed me and she hugged me and she got all excited and her house had burnt down and she'd lost the pictures of her family. And I showed up with the only picture. That sort of warms your heart. There was just all kinds of nice things that happened to us.

Camera man:

Okay. This is room tone with this hissing.

Brunner:

What's he up to? You want to go somewhere else? It's a fan back there.

Camera man:

I just need to get the sound of it. Just don't talk for a few seconds. Okay. And when some future editor uses that part...

Reed:

Did you ever have people that didn't want you to take or capture their image for spiritual reasons or did you run into that?

Brunner:

Only in the Mennonite community.

Reed:

Mennonite. Okay. No American Indians or...

Brunner:

Never have met one.

Reed:

Because I hear that story from time to time...

Brunner:

You're giving away part of your soul. You're losing part of your soul when you. So we have a friend out on Red Lake and she got cured of cancer and she vowed to the Lord to never have a graven image made of herself. And so, I've known her for over 50 years. In the end here, she's 89 years old now. And she let me take her picture, But she was always doing something, snipping beans, reading the Bible. So another book I did is of Floyd's Branch and I have a 50 year collection of all the families that lived on that road. And we put them all in a book and I gave each family one of the books and one of the girls cried. She says, we'd never seen these pictures before we didn't have cameras. And we didn't have pictures growing up. That was rewarding. Made her happy.

Reed:

Yes. I imagine you're full of stories.

Brunner:

I think I told them all already. (laughs) I might think of another one.

Reed:

How many years were you an active photographer? I mean, I know you're a street photographer now, but...

Brunner:

Well, gosh, I started when I was 14 (laughs) and now I'm 90.

Reed:

Okay. So many years. Yeah. Is your studio still open today?

Brunner:

My daughter has it. And she just works by appointments. Yeah.

Reed:

Does she just take portraits or?

Brunner:

Yeah, she does daycares and nursery schools and seniors at the high school and things like that.

Reed:

Did you ever do any work for the Sierra Club?

Brunner:

No.

Reed:

I read something about the Appalachian Science and Public Interest. What kind of work did you do for them?

Brunner:

Well, we did those calendars. And then () wrote like three books. And we did all the photos for them. And Mark Spencer, that's the man that does the calendar, every year for several years, we'd take a trip up into the mountains and we wouldn't have any agenda. Sometimes we stayed in a motel. Sometimes we stayed in the tent and sometimes we would go down roads. We'd never been down before and just find something to photograph for the calendar. And that was fun. Nothing was planned, nothing was organized. And I still do that. Always liked to go on a road I'd never been on before.

Reed:

Were there different themes for each year or?

Brunner:

Yeah, he would work that out. Yeah.

Reed:

Sometimes people, sometimes places?

Brunner:

Yeah. And one on handy crafts, you know, and artists and stuff.

Reed:

And have you published a book?

Brunner:

10.

Reed:

10?

Brunner:

Yeah.

Reed:

Can you tell me about them?

Brunner:

Well, I was at the fair one day and there's another famous photographer there named Snell from Lexington. And I got to talking to him and told him, I'd like to do a book. And he said, I know a man that'll do it and about two days later, this man called on me and we did a book. That's the only hard covered coffee table book I did. And Loyal Jones and I did a book together on the values of the Appalachian people. And then I did three books with Al Fritsch about water and nature and different subjects he wrote on. And then he mailed it to my wife and she would go through my files and pick out the photos to match the words. So when I signed the book I write on there, I hope these will be a blessing to you. Al's meditation, God's word and the photos. So on each page, it had a Bible verse and a meditation and a photo to go with it. And that's the way Al Fritsch likes to do them.

Reed:

Can you tell me a little bit about Al Fritsch?

Brunner:

He's wonderful. Boundless energy. He must be up in his late eighties and he's still working hard and doing everything.

Reed:

What type of work does he do? But those people that don't know.

Brunner:

He does environmental work and he has a website in a daily meditation that you can read or log on and read. I go to a doctor here in town and he logs on to Al Fritsch every morning and sees what he's got to say before he goes to work.

Reed:

Now is he also a Catholic priest?

Brunner:

A Jesuit? Yes.

Reed:

So therefore the meditations

Brunner:

Yeah.

Reed:

Wonderful. Have you worked with Gurney Norman?

Brunner:

Oh Lord. Yes. (laughs)

Reed:

What kind of work have you done to him?

Brunner:

Well, we made that movie for KET, Time on the River. Yeah. And he went from Hazard to the Ohio River in a canoe or a boat, but he had me meet him in Beattyville, or somewhere along the way. And I had a little Sears boat with a little 10 horse motor on it, and I picked him up and we traveled a week together. And where he interviewed people going down the river, like we went to Boonesboro and then interviewed the lady whose dad was in charge of the locks. And she told us about the riverboats that would come up there with the actors and the dancers on them and stuff. So we learned a lot that time.

Reed:

Huh. And so you lived on the river for a week and took pictures?

Brunner:

Yeah. And then I left them at Frankfort and then somebody else went with them, the KET crew went with him and he met somebody else and worked with them.

Reed:

Sounds like a fun time.

Brunner:

Oh, I learned something about photography. He said, one time I asked him about pictures and talking about things. And he said that he gave away everything he did. And he says, and it'll come back to him. And that was how he did it... when it was time for him to do a book, he called up his friends and had his writing that he'd shared with other people. And that helped them do a book. And he did a book, Divine Rights Last Trip. And on the last page, he put all his friends in there. There was a big dance on the last page of the book. And then he said, there's Pat and Warren and Virg and Ruby and Gwen and Ken, they're all our neighbors. So he remembered us all. His sister lives next door to me. So, I see him whenever he comes.

Reed:

Okay. So now that you're officially retired, how do you spend your time?

Brunner:

I watch my grandchildren. And so when I first started, I did everything by numbers. I got two filing cabinets, you know, like going from number one to 8,000, over with a 40 year collection in

there. And then now that I'm retired, I'm putting them into categories. I got one category called living alone. Women living alone. After I retired, I volunteered nonprofits in one of them was Marie Sarillo an ex-nun at Roses Creek, Tennessee. And I went down and she had a little cabin behind her house and I could sleep in it. Then they went out with her taking pictures and the pictures of women living alone were used in a congressional hearing. So I got to do some good that way. And then she had another project. She developed a land trust. And so down there, all the coal camp houses, the family could live in them until they died. And then nobody could have them and they would bulldoze them down. And so some of the children didn't have a place to go. And so her land trust bought some trailers and let the people move into the trailers. And then on the land trust, they learned to build their own homes. And she had volunteers from different churches around the country and they would come and help these people build their homes, you know, because they'd lost theirs to the coal company. And that was a fun project. I've been there several times. It's wonderful each time.

Reed:

Sounds like it. What are some of the other stories that stick in your mind through the years?

Brunner:

I don't know. What do you have on there? You got anything? Give me a hint.

Reed:

Give you a hint? I think I have thrown out...How about the Council of Southern Mountains? Does that ring a bell?

Brunner:

Yeah. Yeah. They lived and died (laughs) and I went to the funeral and it was in Fontana Village and Pat and I went down there and stayed. And that was when they had... it was full of people from all over the country and they voted and took it over. And () when he was there and Richard Bellando and some of those characters. And I got a book in the mail the other day from Billy Ed Wheeler and he told his life story and he mentioned me in there. So that was nice.

Reed:

So have you received awards for your work?

Brunner:

Yeah. Yeah. I don't know what they are. Oh, Eastern Kentucky gave me an award last year.

Reed:

That was the Eastern Kentucky Leadership.

Brunner:

Yeah. I never did quite figure out why, but, they were looking for people that I got to be one of them. And the Southern Highland Guild, I got an award from them and then the Kentucky

Photographers Association, you'd submit your pictures and you'd get awards for that. You know, like a ribbon or something. So I've got a collection somewhere.

Reed:

What is the greatest honor one of your photographs have received, as far as publication goes or...

Brunner:

Well, one was used in Time Magazine. That was a war on poverty picture. One year I won the award for the best photo journalism, you know, award for the Kentucky Photographer's Association. Just for one of my mountain pictures of a little girl.

Reed:

That's good. A little splash of water coming through the window.

Brunner:

Oh, good.

Reed:

Feels rather nice. Can you think of any other interesting stories to share?

Brunner:

I don't know...

Reed:

You said you had a list of questions.

Brunner:

I think I got them all.

Reed:

Do you think we covered them?

Brunner:

Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

Reed:

And here in this studio or office space...

Brunner:

Photo archives, and that's a nice word...

Reed:

You are categorizing your 70+ years of photographs?

Brunner:

Yeah. That's what I'm doing in my old age.

Reed:

Do you have your photographs archived elsewhere?

Brunner:

No. Just here in Berea College.

Reed:

Just at Berea College, you have some?

Brunner:

Yeah.

Reed:

How did you choose which ones are put there?

Brunner:

See those boxes down there? I had 50 of them in this room was full and I had to get rid of them. So I donated them to the college.

Reed:

Did you select specific ones that dealt with the college or Berea or?

Brunner:

Well, and the war on poverty and things that would be interesting like that.

Reed:

Okay. What do you think you'll do with the rest of all these photographs?

Brunner:

I'm going to have my children give them to the college when I die. (laughs) After I get done looking at them and playing with them. That's what I'm doing. I'm enjoying them. Huh?

Reed:

And they have agreed to accept them?

Brunner:

Well, I don't know yet.

Reed:

Oh okay. Those are usually there's an agreement between...

Brunner:

Well, I've already signed one for the ones I gave him. This should just sort of be adding to what I gave him.

Reed:

Well, it sounds like a wonderful and very appropriate place for them to be.

Brunner:

Yeah, it's been fun.

Reed:

Yes, you've made your career here in Berea...

Brunner:

Oh and I met a lot of crazy people and a lot of nice people. There's a bunch of old men that go in the woods, looking for petroglyphs. That's the Indian writings on the walls of the cliffs. Except we call them Ogham. And they were the people that came through here between 300 and 700 AD. They were from Scotland. And that's where the Ogham writing comes from. And so we sorta had a club and we'd go back in the woods and find them and then we'd send them off and they would translate them. A man named Barry () He lived in California and he translated them. One of them said "Our times are hard and our conditions are poor. We wished we had a man like Joseph, who we could borrow, against, and pay back at a later date". That's how he interpreted one of them. And all the lines. They're all vertical lines. And you read them like the barcode on the grocery store. That's what they looked like. They're all vertical. And then there's an invisible horizontal line. And then like three lines above would be one letter to the alphabet. Three lines below would be another letter of the alphabet. And so we maybe went to 25 different sites in Jackson County and Madison and Clay County. So that's sort of our hobby. But now, all of us are getting too old to go into the woods.

Reed:

Are you familiar with Al Cornett?

Brunner:

Yeah, sure am. He and I worked at IBM together.

Reed:

You're kidding. You worked at IBM at one time?

Brunner:

Yeah.

Reed:

Because he has done that with the writings at the Gorge. Published a book.

Brunner:

Yeah. Right. Yeah. That's where we went and saw some of them. There's a Dr. () in Berea that went with us. A David Feldman, from the Feldman Lumber Company in Lancaster. And his men would be out in the woods and when they saw them, the writings, then they would call them and then we'd go up there and photograph them and record them and send them off to be interpreted. So that was sort of a hobby that involved desire and walking in the woods. You met a lot of interesting people. You had a lot of pictures.

Reed:

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Brunner:

No. I just like to thank the Kentucky Guild. Thank them for getting me started and letting me be in their second fair from then on. And so that became a big part of our life.

Reed:

Well, thank you very much for taking the time to sit for this interview today. We certainly appreciate it.

Brunner:

Thank you.

Camera man:

Just give me another minute or so of quiet. Okay. Talk away.

Reed:

The guild sure introduces you to a lot of people.

Brunner:

And then you're also under on their mailing lists. The other craft shows would get their mailing list, you know? Ad so we've been to Western Kentucky, Louisville and Cincinnati. And one time we went up to New England to a show. So we were lucky to get around.

Reed:

Yeah. Did you ever do anything with the Kentucky Arts Council?

END OF INTERVIEW

